



Shared Voices: A Pathway to Strengthen Relationships with Homeless Young Children and Families

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This qualitative study examined whether the influence of *Learning Stories*, a narrative assessment approach, impacts relationships for low-income, underrepresented young children who are homeless, living in transitional housing, or at risk for stable housing as a means to support healthy development. The project focused on relationships, parent and teacher collaboration, and the theoretical framework of *Ghosts and Angels in the Nursery* as a lens to understand how childhood memories can impact child rearing practices and influence adult and child interactions (Lieberman, Padrón, Van Horn, & Harris, 2005).

Findings included the following themes: a) individual development of children; b) children addressed directly and viewed as important; c) attention on positive attributes of the children rather than deficits; d) open communication occurred between educators and parents; e) teachers show deep care for children; f) parents' care of children; and g) teachers' deeper reflection about children's learning experiences. Research findings reveal *Learning Stories*, a narrative formative assessment approach, provides opportunities that influence positive educator and child, parent and family relationships.

Introduction

Positive relationships are critical to fostering the healthy development of very young children (Thompson, Meyer, & McGinley, 2006); however, young children who are homeless may be in jeopardy of not experiencing trusting, caring relationships. It is uncertain if building secure relationships can impact development and growth for low-income, underrepresented young children who are homeless, living in transitional housing, or at risk for stable housing. The objective of this qualitative study was to examine whether the influence of *Learning Stories*, a narrative assessment approach, impacts relationships as a pathway to support the healthy development of young children. This study examined the influence of the *Learning Stories* assessment approach to document children's learning and its impact on the interactions and relationships among teachers, parents, and children.

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The *Learning Stories* method was developed in New Zealand and is used as the primary early childhood education formative assessment (Carr, 2001). This method includes documenting children's learning experiences with written observations through a storytelling format, directed to the child in first person narrative. This unique approach helps teachers write observations as "stories" which are written directly to the child instead of *about* the child (Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012). Instead of teachers writing anecdotal observations of children's developmental progress, teachers write observations as stories to the child about children's learning and growth (Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012). *Learning Stories* was examined to explore ways teachers and parents create and share written observations to build positive relationships.

Parents are involved in constructing *Learning Stories* and are encouraged to write responses back to their child regarding the "story" the teacher wrote about their child's learning in a classroom setting. Parents also write their own "stories" to capture children's learning through writing about their lived experiences and connecting home to school experiences. *Learning Stories* is an innovative assessment approach which offers educators and parents the opportunity to partner in the education of young children through the sharing of written stories describing children's learning experiences. Educators have found the value of family voice as integral to the assessment process as teachers engage with families to understand and honor their unique perspective. The *Learning Stories* serve both as a guide and tangible artifact documenting the child's learning experiences through teacher analysis and reflection.

Learning from one another, families and teachers deepen their understanding of the child, and identify possibilities to support growth in multiple contexts. *Learning Stories* facilitates reflective practice in learning community models while promoting sensitive curriculum planning attuned to the children's interests and strengths with family context woven into the process. As a result, *Learning Stories* create a pathway where multiple voices and perspectives are honored and valued. This study examined if *Learning Stories* creates an opportunity for teacher and parent collaboration and the possible impact on relationships between teachers and parents, teachers and children, and (ultimately) parents and children.

Group interviews were conducted with teachers from early education centers who serve vulnerable young children and families who are homeless or at risk of being homeless. Parent-child relationships were examined to determine if children felt understood, accepted, and loved through the sharing of teachers' and parents' *Learning Stories* narrative observations (Carr, 1998; Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012). The study focused on the possible impact the *Learning Stories* method has on relationships and children's development of security and self-worth as a means to lessen the cycle of maltreatment and trauma experienced, caused by stressors such as homelessness or lack of stable housing.

Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

The study draws upon the theoretical framework of "Ghosts and Angels in the Nursery" (Lieberman, et al., 2005) to understand how young homeless children may benefit from supportive adult relationships through the sharing of narrative stories between teachers and parents. The theoretical framework of "Ghosts and Angels in the Nursery" (Lieberman, et al., 2005) suggests sharing of childhood memories is

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deeply connected to care practices. This is because strong exchanges shared between parents and children provide young children with a core sense of self-worth. Furthermore, Lieberman et al. (2005) proposes that messages of inherent goodness and unconditional love constitute the essence of “an angel.” As parents share about their own lived experiences, they unknowingly evoke angels from their childhood into their own young children’s “nurseries.” In this way, the message of the “angels in the nursery” is transmitted from parent to child in the form of the deep caring relationship which influences development. The framework of “Ghosts and Angels in the Nursery” helps to create an understanding of how teachers and parents who share young children’s positive learning experiences through *Learning Stories* create new “angels” and replace the “ghosts” of the past. This study examined the sharing of *Learning Stories* between teachers and parents which replaces old “ghosts” with new “angels” and helps create new memories with a strong image of the child as competent and capable, resulting in the child’s developing sense of self. The synchrony of parent and child relationships through the sharing of *Learning Stories* can be understood through the theoretical framework lenses of “Ghosts and Angels in the Nursery” to examine the impact of *Learning Stories* on these relationships.

Data

Sample

Participants were recruited from two early childhood education program sites. The first early childhood education program has a toddler classroom, a Head Start classroom, and a State Preschool Program. This early childhood education program serves children from two to five years of age. Only the toddler teachers were included in this study. From this program, three toddler teachers and one administrator were recruited for this study. The second early childhood education program has an infant classroom and a toddler classroom. This program has six infant and toddler teachers and two administrators who were recruited. The combined sample consisted of n=12 teachers and administrators. The sample race and ethnicity comprised of n=8 Latinos, n=4 Caucasians. The sample gender included n=12 females. The study was approved by an institutional review board (IRB).

Data Collection

The primary source of data for this study consists of transcripts from five group interviews. Interviews were conducted to examine teacher and administrator responses of their use of *Learning Stories* written narrative observations and the possible impact on parent-child relationships. Group interviews followed a protocol tool designed to guide the dialogue through a sequence of questions regarding the use of *Learning Stories*. These group interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes each for a total of approximately 175 minutes of audio recordings. Group interviews followed a prepared, semi-structured protocol. Transcription totaled over 76 pages of double-spaced text. Audio recorded group interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service agency. Transcriptions were carefully reviewed to understand and interpret the data. Upon completion of all transcriptions, detailed themes emerged which later formed the basis for the coding system.

Methods

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A qualitative case study method was used to analyze the data. The qualitative software MAXQDA was utilized to code the teacher and administrators group interviews. MAXQDA is a PC-based program that helps to systematically evaluate, interpret, and code transcripts (Creswell, 2009). Open axial coding was used to analyze the teacher and administrator group interview responses about their use of the *Learning Stories* approach and to investigate the impact on relationships. Open coding was used to develop labels. Axial coding was used to identify relationships between identified codes and selective coding was conducted to extract the main themes that emerged from the data analysis (Yin, 2009).

A process of identifying categories, incorporating open coding, and utilization refined through axial coding, allowed for identification and deeper understanding of emerging themes (Merriam, 2009). Analysis took place in order to extract what Merriam (2009) refers to as the “deeper meaning” from the group interviews. Multiple levels of codes were created into lists, and sub-codes and themes emerged during transcription analysis.

Results

This research study’s findings show that relationships were influenced and strengthened from the process of sharing the *Learning Stories* in the following areas: a) teacher focus on the individual development of children; b) the addressing of children directly and viewing as an important element that parents responded to positively; c) attention on the positive attributes of children rather than deficits; d) open communication that occurred between educators and parents; e) teachers showed parents they care deeply for children; f) the care parents provide for children; and g) opportunities for teacher’s deeper reflection about children’s learning experiences. Research findings reveal *Learning Stories* help teachers and parents focus more closely on children’s learning and development. *Learning Stories* provides opportunities that influence positive parent-child, teacher-parent, and teacher-child relationships. The influence of caring, loving relationships have a positive impact on children’s self-worth and self-esteem.

Study Significance

The study findings suggest incorporating observation and assessment practices, such as *Learning Stories*, builds positive relationships and fosters development of young at-risk children. Healthy child development depends on the quality and consistency of relationships with adults, both within and outside the family (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). The importance of building relationships is essential because it establishes emotional connections for young children, starting from birth, through trust and closeness (Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Thompson, et al., 2006). Young children experience the world through relationships, which ultimately affect many areas of development (Herbers, Cutuli, Monn, Narayan, & Masten, 2014; Masten et al., 2014; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Through positive relationships, children discover who they are and learn about others (Hartup & Rubin, 2013). When young children have experiences with caring and thoughtful adults who delight in them, they approach the world with openness and eagerness, and they grow to be respectful, responsive, and loving people (Lally & Mangione, 2017).

Children benefit when families collaborate in partnership with educators and commit to work together on the behalf of children (Mendez, 2010). Children who have teachers that collaborate with parents and

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include them in the education of their children are more likely to experience positive outcomes (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Howes, 1999; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Often though, low-income, underrepresented families are not included in the education of children and can result in weakening relationships with educators (Friedman, Bobrowski, & Geraci, 2006; McAllister et al., 2005; Robinson-Zanartu & Majel-Dixon, 1997; Tveit, 2009). Teachers who engage families in assessment practices, through sharing observations such as with *Learning Stories* written narratives, help to strengthen home-to-school connections. Sharing narrative observations, which focus on children's positive learning experiences, provides opportunities to celebrate children's growth and development. For families who may be struggling to provide secure and stable housing, sharing narrative observations of children's learning can be a powerful collaboration tool and support the child with developing an identity as a learner.

Learning Stories observation approach appears to benefit young children through enhanced family engagement. Furthermore, it demonstrates the importance that early childhood education programs integrate assessment practices that include the voices of diverse, underrepresented families. Early childhood education programs need to continue to explore ways to adapt observation and assessment methods to provide opportunities for collaboration between teachers and parents that include authentic dialogue and children's lived experiences in multiple contexts. It is vital that early childhood education programs include families in the assessment practices through innovative approaches to observation so that diverse students, especially vulnerable young children who are homeless, living in transitional housing, or at risk of losing stable housing, may potentially benefit.

About the Author

Dr. Annie White is an Assistant Professor with the Early Childhood Studies program at California State University, Channel Islands (CSUCI). She has extensive work experience with Early Head Start (EHS), Head Start, and State preschool and family childcare home programs. Dr. White has taught early childhood education courses at California Community Colleges in addition to her current work at CSUCI. She is passionate about *Learning Stories* and incorporates the formative assessment approach in her University courses, including infant/toddler curriculum and assessment, student learner identity through "My Story," and as part of community service learning. Her research interests include formative assessments, learning stories, and family engagement.

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